

Participatory art in healthcare

The power of encounter

Bulckmans, N. & Van Helshoecht, I.; AP University College, Belgium

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the profession, arts and creative activities are central to occupational therapy practice, both as a means and an end. Occupational therapists focus on autonomy and meaningful activities. Creating, experiencing and presenting art can be an effective tool in increasing independence.

Participatory art-based projects use the artistic process to potentially bring about social change. Most of these art projects revolve around the participation of vulnerable groups, and the aim to give them a voice and to empower them to take action to reinvent and reshape their living environment. Despite the growing evidence that arts practices can improve people's mental and physical health and well-being, arts projects in health care are limited and scarce and a framework that guides encounter and collaboration in participatory arts projects is lacking.^{1, 2, 3}

OBJECTIVE

The aim of this research project is to develop a process framework to enable participatory arts practice as a shared activity for clients, health, social care professionals and artists in diverse care contexts.

METHOD

Existing good practices were reviewed and in-depth interviews with six artists (a composer, an actor and director, a conceptual artist, a sculptor, a poet, a dancer and choreographer) were conducted. Through thematic analysis⁴ deliberated by two researchers, the characteristics and conditions essential for successful and sustainable participatory art projects were identified and represented in a process framework. Based on the interviews, a video is created to inspire and encourage artists and care organizations to connect, create and experience art together.

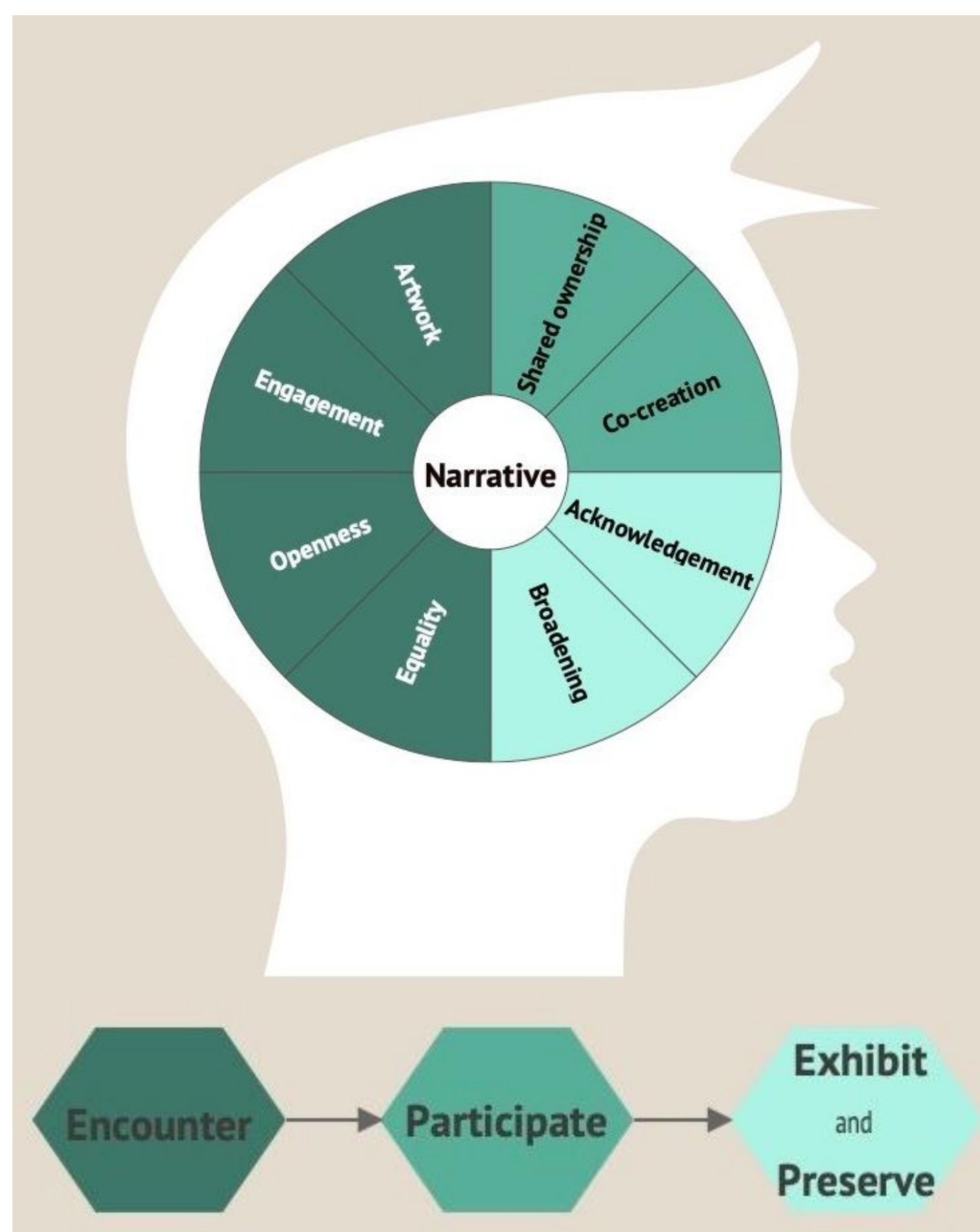


Figure 1: Process framework for participatory art practice

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RESULTS

The process framework for participatory art practices represents a non-linear process that is structured around four stages and eight principles with the narrative as a central and consistent facilitator for the whole process.

The circular format shows the non-linearity of the process across four roughly distinguishable stages. An art project typically starts with a narrative-based **encounter** that leads to **participation**. After **exhibiting**, **preserving** the effects of the artwork and the process would be a characteristic closing phase.

Eight principles were prominent throughout the interviews with the artists and express the essence of good practice in participatory art projects. **The narrative**, defined as the participant's life story, identity, competences and needs, appears to be an overarching facilitator for the other principles.

The artistic process is not preconceived but is characterized by **openness**. Participatory art projects evolve over time taking an indeterminate course through the unpredictable interactions and methodologies.

Let them all be their own. Don't come up with big ideas and even bigger plans but see what's going on, feel the atmosphere at the moment... (Sculptor)

A welcoming environment, trust and acceptance enable **engagement**. It's about inviting and attracting people, adapting the communication and not generalizing. Approaching each individual in a specific and personal way.

We work with a low threshold, without registration and you can come earlier or later. We also work with a free contribution and do it in various languages. (Dancer and choreographer)

Sir, the rector of the university, and a lady from the neighborhood together on one stage, in a conversation, in this for me poetry exists. (Poet)

A non-judgmental atmosphere based on **equality** and mutual recognition is required to achieve active participation. On the one hand, commonality is sought, and on the other hand, differences are just exploited. Imbalances in knowledge and skills are eliminated through dialogue and openness.

The **artwork** is more than bringing about a creative process. The arts can transform people and shift their identity. A person with psychological vulnerability becomes a musician or a poet.

That's what I think the arts should offer today: being close to people and making them feel, "Wow! My story has a value and I am heard. (Actor and director)

When participants feel free to express themselves, **co-creation** occurs. Empathy combined with creative skills and an appropriate art form make participants feel encouraged and supported to experience art.

I found it astonishing that, as an artist, I was allowed to sow the seeds of a project that developed further through the engagement of the participants. And to have, as an artist myself, the feeling of becoming redundant. That's amazing. (Poet)

It's about inclusion and participation. In which I absolutely do not feel that I have put aside my own artistic work to do something social. On the contrary, the collaboration was a richness for me. This inspired me to write a poem. (Poet)

Shared-ownership means that all participants take responsibility according to their talents and dreams. Taking responsibility also offers growth opportunities towards co-creation. An interaction that inspires, influences and enriches.

A spearhead of participatory art projects is qualitative artistic finality. By presenting something creative and artistic, a diverse audience is addressed and triggered. The appreciation and **acknowledgement** of the spectators creates a positive movement.

Presenting, going out there with your story, who you are, and getting applause and appreciation for your story that makes a person grow. We can make them feel that with the arts. (Actor and director)

I feel like there are still walls around the art world, that there is a barrier between the arts and the community. There's still a whole world out there that doesn't connect with art or dance. We want to eliminate that by really bringing dance into the public. (Dancer and choreographer)

Ideally, participatory art projects are **broadening** by bringing about social change and creating new opportunities to implement art in society. It broadens the artist's field of work and makes art more accessible.

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In the video, six artists promote, from their own experiences, the best practices for participatory art and inspire and encourage others to actively contribute to participatory art practice.



DISCUSSION

Art and health research has a dominant focus on outcomes, effect and impact studies, while mechanism that underlie the effects of art activities often remain understudied^{5, 6}.

The presented process framework for participatory art practices is not static and rigid, but rather should be seen as a loose guideline that get the process of co-creation started and orients on the conditions for successful art practices in health and social care.

A limitation of this study is the selection of the artists. The interviewed artists were recruited randomly but through acquaintances while the field of work is much wider. The process framework was not yet tested in practice. This will be done in the future.

CONCLUSION

In this research project a process framework and image that guides and promotes participatory art practice to enable shared occupation for clients, caregivers and artists was developed. The process framework can be applied in the professional practice of occupational therapists as well as in the curriculum of occupational therapy courses. In addition, it helps to embed participatory arts practices in the strategic goals and vision of healthcare organizations and artists.

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